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ABSTRACT

To increase intercultural competence, early childhood educators must think globally and act locally, providing their young students with an awareness of different cultures. Teachers can begin and continue the process of teaching intercultural competence by focusing on the family unit. This focus should include four steps: (1) promoting advocacy (examining one's own biases, recognizing different family structures, and undoing biases); (2) maintaining steadfastness (examining and focusing on the various aspects of family diversity on an ongoing basis); (3) utilizing visuals (such as pictures from publications, family photographs, videos, and real objects); and (4) tapping varied resources (including local libraries, bookstores, the Internet, and computer software). (Contains 11 references.)

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Enhancing Intercultural Competence: Begin With the Family

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Enhancing Intercultural Competence: Begin With the Family

The increased emphasis on intercultural competence is evident by the expanding global markets, expansion of world travel, emergence of immigrants, and increase in electronic technology such as the World Wide Web. With the increasing global environment, it is imperative that children understand different cultures. What a better place to begin the journey than in one's own educational setting--where cultures and the opportunities for cultivating cultural awareness are evident. Children that possess an awareness and value their own family are apt to be more accepting of others (Bieger, 1996; Cangemi & Aucoin, 1996). To enhance intercultural competence, early childhood educators need to begin to "think globally, act locally, starting where they are with what they got" (Bernard, 1993, p.10).

Simply defined, intercultural competence is the awareness of distinct characteristics of a culture. According to Lustig and Koester (1993), a "culture" is "a learned set of shared perceptions about beliefs, values, and norms which affect the behaviors of a group of people" (p. 43). This culture can be the family, the classroom, the school, the

community, or a nation. The definition of a "family" is "you and the people you live with "(Bete, 1994, p.3). According to the Multicultural Principles of Head Start, one begins by recognizing that "each child is already rooted in culture" (Phillips, 1993, p. 17).

While early childhood educators may have been teaching children to understand intercultural competence, the question is have they really embraced the concept? This is a challenging task. No longer can we call America "The Melting Pot." This metaphor was used to believe that all people were placed into one context...and while they were part of the larger whole, the loss of identities and cultures occurred. In today's early childhood settings, educators are to encourage children that the acceptance of other cultures is important. A puzzle, mosaic, tapestry, pizza, and salad are the metaphors to use now...indicating how each unique part is a contributing factor to the whole while each unique part maintains its own identity.

Educators can begin and/or continue the process of teaching intercultural competence by focusing on the family unit by: (1) promoting advocacy, (2) maintaining steadfastness, (3) utilizing visuals, and (4) tapping the resources. These aspects when intertwined will begin the process for intercultural competence with children while connecting ***both*** the *similarities* and *differences* of families within the classroom walls.

PROMOTING ADVOCACY

To promote advocacy one has to examine one's own biases. Prejudices remain in all individuals and unless a conscious effort is made to overcome certain stereotypes, the efforts for promoting intercultural competence are weakened. Educators need to examine their words, actions, and interactions with others--be it with children, parents, colleagues, administrators, and/or community members. The advocacy of intercultural competence can begin by recognizing the various types of family structures. The traditional family of two parents living together is no longer the norm for children in today's classrooms. Early childhood teachers can help children recognize the various types of families--single parent, two parent, step/blended, adoptive, foster, guardianship, gender-related, and shelter. Early childhood educators need to recognize the process of equalization of these family configurations and include this family diversity in the teaching process. When educators make deliberate attempts to undo any biasness and attempt to open the views to varying perspectives, they are making strides towards a level of competence. Only when advocacy is deliberately immersed within the infrastructure of early childhood programs are educators taking steps towards promoting intercultural competence.

MAINTAINING STEADFASTNESS

The steadfastness for early childhood educators is to help children "find their voices" (Cline,1998, p. 701) while exploring their family structures within the classroom. According to Cline, the challenges remain with the questions of: "How are children accepted? How can we create or discover an environment that allows cultures to co-exist? Or are we destined to enculturate all with our norms, values, and proprieties? Why is there so much fear? So much need to control?"

Steadfastness is accomplished by maintaining and creating the aspects of family diversity as an on-going basis. Thematic instruction is the usual basis for curriculum development at the early childhood levels. Educators can create and promote an infinite variety of opportunities for thematic instruction based on the cultural universals. Several of the "cultural universals" (Lustig and Koester, 1993, p. 49) provide opportunities for children to explore and perceive the similarities as well as the differences of family living. Some of the cultural universals are foods, sports, games, housing, folklore, nicknames, manners, and housing to name a few. Imagine the excitement by planning a thematic unit on games children play. By observing and recognizing what different families do and what behaviors are special to one's family can help children become more

accepting and understanding. Thus, regardless of the selection of a thematic unit, there are countless ways for educators to weave in family diversity throughout the school year and not just for a week when the particular focus is on the family. Steadfastness means maintaining the momentum for family diversity with all the thematic units implemented.

UTILIZING VISUALS

It is through visualizing important concepts and facts that students can build knowledge bases. According to Miles (1994, p. 50), visualizing means "creating mental pictures to aid in learning, thinking and solving." Learning is more meaningful when children can see pictures or real objects.

It is important to clip pictures from newspapers, magazines, and other means which relate to cultures of different families. This can be any type of visual information which provides insights for children to recognize varying family cultures. Include some of the areas that show trends as well as perhaps aspects of the cultural universals. This overall awareness helps children appreciate other cultures including their own.

Have children bring in photographs of their family's traditions, holidays, and daily activities. This promotes parental/guardianship involvement. One can expand activities to include videos as well as music that children are familiar with in their "home" settings.

Utilize real objects and various forms of visuals as opportunities for sharing and promoting intercultural competence.

TAPPING VARIED RESOURCES

As early childhood educators, consider tapping various resources to expand the range of learning. Many educational publications have been written about ways for generating diversity into the curriculum. Besides the educational publications, consider the various opportunities while utilizing children's literature as a source. According to Burstyn (1993) new concepts can be learned through storytelling.

> "Most people learn more easily through stories than through receiving information directly. But, there is a crucial point to remember about stories: they are effective as a means of learning, only when some part of them links to the listeners' own experience (making the unfamiliar familiar) and only when the listener goes on to elaborate his or her own story with part of that material." (p. 3)

With this approach, children become more conscious of the ways others families and people view issues. This will expand the horizons for children to become aware of ways that families are alike and different. Contact your local library and visit a bookstore to determine the availability of these resources.

A plethora of information can be located from the World Wide Web. Various websites provide insights into ways for working intercultural competence in the curriculum at the early childhood levels. Seek out resources that would be valuable to your population of students. The Web certainly is a tool for helping early childhood educators learn and discover. Lesson plans are already available on line for ideas and ways to implement aspects of family diversity. One can adapt and adjust these ideas to accommodate your learners.

Another avenue for achieving intercultural competence is to examine software. "Today's teachers are encouraged to add technology to supplement reading and classroom activities..." (Morin, 1997, p. 24). These avenues provide visuals such as clip art, digital graphics, and other educational materials. Transparencies, small booklets, cards, and other visuals can encourage children to relate their own experiences while recognizing the uniqueness of families. Some of the software enhancements are: "People Who Are Important To Me," "A Chair For My Mother," "All Colors of the Race," and "How My Family Learned to Eat." It is also the opportune time to encourage children to use these resources if computer equipment is available.

CONCLUSION

While the trend contines with a global culture, to maximize the effectiveness of intercultural competence, early childhood educators cannot overlook the individual family unit. Providing children with the awareness of different cultures positions them to prosper and interact with others. As Burstyn (1993, p.9) suggests "teachers have to find ways to make the familiar unfamiliar, and the unfamiliar familiar." For it is in this way that teachers become more effective in their teaching while helping children understand and accept others in a better and deeper manner.

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